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Importance of Soft Skills in Work Place

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Abstract

The paper discusses various aspects of soft skill in contrast to the hard skills. The paper draws attention to the need of soft skill in the tertiary level of education which will prepare the students for the work place in order to overcome the skill gaps in the industry.

Importance of Soft Skills in Work Place

One of the important soft skills is communicative skill, which makes it an important field for any language instructor. Soft skill as opposed to hard skill involve skill sets to deal with one's own self as well as with other fellow beings such as co-workers, colleagues, bosses, subordinates and customers. In other words, it incorporates a wide arena of various interpersonal and social skills. It is difficult to narrow down to the skill sets which are considered to be soft skill. Mostly these skills deal with inter-personal and intrapersonal communication in variedly diverse cultural settings. Many employers complain that their employees do not possess soft skill. "The 'blame game' for these skills deficits is frequently directed at the individual, family or government." The challenge is to get prepared with the skill sets required in the industry/workplace etc. Every industry sector or even every company might have its own sub-culture, which accounts for its uniqueness, work ethics and accountability.

The paper attempts to throw some light on the problems involved in figuring out a soft skill curriculum within the established academic setup for the students who are undergoing technical education such as engineering and medical education. It explores some of the recent studies in this field and also examines the practices in industry and teaching institutes to develop soft skills. There is often gap between the expected skillsets of the industry and the skillset acquired by the

fresh recruits. The paper explores the various possibilities of framing effective soft skill curriculum.

Soft skills are not any subjects like Physics or Philosophy that relies strongly on the cognition of the students. Rather the soft skills are non-cognitive skills or traits, which like language and other social behaviour need to be acquired. There have been studies in the domain of Sociology which come out with impressive findings. One such finding, though it may look digressive at this point, for example, states that teenage motherhood increases impulsivity which negatively affects development of soft skill. There are negative effects on the personal qualities which are regarded as positive such as “openness to experience”. Thus “a trait that has been found to have negative effects on a large set of outcomes and has a negative effect on other personality traits perceived as positive, such as openness to experiences. Therefore, adolescence may be a sensitive period for the development of soft **skills** and that childbearing may interrupt this process (Fletcher and Padrón 883).” The above example was meant to hint at the diverse conditions that affects personality and skill development.

In the working situation, hard skills normally denote the technical processes that are usually easy to observe, quantify, and measure. Inculcating such skills for fresh students is somewhat easy given that they have acquired the necessary knowledge in college. In contrast, soft skills, which are normally referred as “people skills,” are not easily imparted even though they are very much essential in the working life. These skills can be usually branded into three major clusters namely, personal attributes, interpersonal skills, and problem solving and decision making skills. Previous literature researches suggest that hard and soft skills complement each other. Thus, a research by Spencer and Spencer indicates that superior performers possess both technical and good behavioural skills (Spencer and Spencer 76).

According to Shakir, the process of human capital development should concentrate on the seven soft skill elements consisting of “communication skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills, team work, lifelong learning and information management skills, entrepreneurship skills, ethics, and professional moral and leadership skills (Shakir 309)”. These elements as identified by Shakir, are important for the students who are pursuing higher education as they are at the verge of landing into job market. Similarly, The improvement of human capital and the redesigning the mind-set to acquire job specific skill not only to seek employment but also to make them small entrepreneur who can group together to start small business of their own and grow successfully.

With the increase in the size of their enterprise more jobs will be created. If the students are equipped with the above mentioned elements, they can put those skill sets into practical use and start their own business. Centring on these ranges will empower the nation to raise its ability for information, innovativeness, and development, which are crucial components with regards to globalization.

Hewitt describes soft skills as essentially people skills—the nontechnical, intangible, personality-specific skills that determine an individual’s strength as a leader, listener, negotiator, and conflict mediator (Hewitt). He describes hard skills as those in education, experience, and level of expertise. Purdue University’s Center for Career Opportunities describes soft skills as higher standards that are replacing the minimum acceptable skills in today’s competitive job market, “specifically, the cluster of personality traits, social graces, and facility with language, personal habits, friendliness, and optimism that mark each of us to varying degrees (Ellis, Kisling, and Hackworth 435)”. Soft skills should complement hard skills, which are the technical requirements of a job. The Soft skills training curriculum, developed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), defines soft skills as “non-technical skills, abilities, and traits required to function in a specific employment environment (Control, Prevention, and others 3)”. Based on the researchers’ experience and literature in the field, this study defines soft skills as skills and competencies that are not technical, technological, or basic skills. Soft skills are often called people skills because, collectively, they demonstrate an employee’s ability to manage, organize, and negotiate relationships.

Seven Oklahoma Chambers of Commerce were asked to rank soft skills that were important when hiring. The employers ranked ethical standards and integrity, work ethic, self-direction and initiative, communications, dependability and attendance, listening skills, and accountability as the most important traits (Ellis, Kisling, and Hackworth 6).

Using the studies by Boyzatis (1982) and Stevens and Campion (1994), four categories for soft skills can be identified (Weber et al. 355):

1. Leadership/people/relationship skills: These are the skills necessary for negotiation, to work in a team, to deliver services to the clients and to resolve conflicts. These skills are significant because they help individuals and organizations accomplish their goals (Kantrowitz, 2005).

2. Communication: These skills are associated with listening and speaking, ability to make presentations, and nonverbal communications. As per the study made by Riggio (1986) about the Social Skills Indicator (SSI) to assess social and communication skills, he found that higher scores on the SSI was directly related to better job performance.

3. Management/organization skills: These skills include expressing goals, organizing people and resources, monitoring progress, and resolving problems in the work place.

4. Cognitive skills and knowledge: These skills are associated with creative thinking, appropriate decision making, and solving problems within the workplace (Conrad, 1999). Kesselman, Lopez, and Lopez (1982) found that problem solving, decision making, and planning scores (as assessed by an in-basket exercise) were positively related to overall job performance. Spector, Schneider, Vance, and Hezlett (2000) also found that in-basket performance significantly and positively correlated with management potential scores.

The one shoe fits all model of curriculum will not be suitable for soft skill. The soft skills for an engineer, a scientist, a doctor, a soldier in the army, a diplomat, or a manager all need to be different, a need to be dealt with differently. It reminds us of the fictional character of a well-known Bollywood movie titled *Munna Bhai MBBS* (2003) (Hirani), where the protagonist Munna, a gangster manages to get admission in a reputed medical college and makes banter of the high seriousness of the doctors who treat the patients like ‘subjects’ rather than persons with emotion. At a moving scene Munna becomes a care giver and a source of solace to a cancer patient who direly believes that Munna can save his life. Munna fails to save the life but at the end though unsuccessful of becoming a doctor Munna teaches the doctors a lesson to be more humane with the patients. Munna points out at the lack of soft skills among doctors which reduces trust among patients. In another concrete example we can talk about the job specific soft skills of the doctors. Doctors and hospital managers should attend classes to learn skills such as how to calm distressed nerves with nominal or no words at all, the art of lending ears and the function of empathy in the healing process. “Non-verbal communication has a special relevance in healthcare because patients pay close attention to the non-verbal signals of health professionals. They rely on these signals to gain trust before any verbal interaction takes place,” says Professor Deepa Sethi from IIM Kozhikode who has designed a course of soft skill for doctors after conducting a national survey. According to Sethi patient compliance with a treatment rests on “mostly upon their considering the

doctor as empathetic.” Deepa Sethi has identified four aspects that affect a patient’s response to the treatment of doctor and points out the necessity for proper training in “communication for doctors in factors like: eye contact, active listening, interpersonal skills, social touch, appearance and body language.” According to a report, some senior doctors have a paternalistic attitude towards patients they do not prefer to be questioned by the patients and their relatives. “The old dictum was lesser the questions asked, the better for patients. Such paternalistic attitude is still the norm in most medical schools. Students see their professors behaving in this manner and imbibe it ... poor communication skills among doctors is hence not surprising (Iyer) ”.

Moving to the context of management education, for hospitality industry, a manager is expected to master seven categories of Soft Skills comprising of as many as 116 skills (Weber, Crawford, and Dennison 225–226). Similarly, the goal of an Office Training program in college is to provide essential training for individuals who are eager to do a job in “either an entry-level or an advanced-level in an office environment”. Maureen Ellis, Eric Kisling, and Robbie G. Hackworth in their article tells us that soft skills imparted in soft skills community colleges in an office technology course are compatible with the soft skills companies require in today’s entry-level office work (Ellis, Kisling, and Hackworth 433) . Therefore, this study supports the inclusion of soft skills courses in office technology programs.

Therefore, based on the above scenarios we can say that soft skill is important in the knowledge and service based economy of this decade. Every sector across various discipline have to find out the need-based curriculum by locating the gaps in skills of the prospective employees. With the globalization and liberalization of the knowledge based market economy the relationship between industry and academia has strengthened like never before. Therefore, it is apt to work in close connection with the industry and its ever growing and changing needs of better human capital. To put in a word, soft skills predict success in the life of the working professionals in every field.

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